

Nick Marsellas, "Review of 'Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy,' edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

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Book Reviews

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## Review of *Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*, edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (Palgrave Macmillan)

**Nick Marsellas**

**ABSTRACT** In this edited collection, Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn draw together cutting-edge thinkers on queer pedagogy and queer activist praxis in an effort to dismantle the historical underpinnings of education as a tool of oppression. As an alternative to normative education, the editor offer up queer pedagogy as a methodology for "challenging accepted hierarchies, binaries, and hegemonies that have long dominated pedagogy and praxis" (5). The collection features the queering of traditionally normative classroom and academic spaces alongside queer approaches towards less commonly acknowledged sites of learning, such as social media websites, community advocacy meetings, and prisons.

*Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*. Edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, XIV, 334 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978-3-319-64622-0. US List: \$119.00.

In this edited collection, Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn draw together cutting-edge thinkers on queer pedagogy and queer activist praxis in an effort to dismantle the historical underpinnings of education as a tool of oppression. While few of the contributing authors in this book explicitly cite critical pedagogy, that tradition of thought has been so formative to queer pedagogical frameworks as to hardly need citation. As an alternative to normative education, McNeil, Wermers, and Lunn offer up queer pedagogy as a methodology for "challenging accepted hierarchies, binaries, and hegemonies that have long dominated pedagogy and praxis" (5). The collection features the queering of traditionally normative classroom and academic spaces alongside queer approaches towards less commonly acknowledged sites of learning, such as social media websites, community advocacy meetings, and prisons.

Large concepts like "queer" and "praxis" hold the book together thematically, while the sections of the book draw the arguments of each author's chapter into larger threads. The text begins by highlighting the queer potential within educational systems and the danger of invoking this queerness uncritically. Authors invoke "queer"'s expansive capacity to hold all those who do not fit into cisheteronormative constructions of the self while also reminding readers that queer students still face very real challenges as a result of their queerness that other students do not. The collection then extends the scope of pedagogy "to consider how we might learn to be queer in public spaces" (8). This expands our understanding of pedagogy to encompass the various ways that we are enculturated into normativity and subsequently discover our escape from it. After centering the wide-ranging category of learning, the collection shifts to a focus on teaching, beginning with

classroom educators and expanding to activist and nontraditional lineages of knowledge and tactic sharing.

The important work of the earlier chapters' interventions into normative pedagogical paradigms reappears in and informs the latter chapters' expansion of "queer pedagogy" into the realm of praxis and activism. Katie Goldstein writes about queer resistance to housing insecurity through the proliferation of queer communal homes in Brooklyn. Educators Elizabeth McNeil and Joshua O. Lunn (one free and the other incarcerated) compose a conversation as they teach "queer thought in the radical context of the prison," ultimately making a powerful case for such radical reform that the prison system would be unrecognizable (12). The academic writing is also refreshingly interspersed with alternatives to traditional academic prose. The collection excerpts some of the best creative nonfiction sections of Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer*, recomposed to accentuate the embodied quality of learning and teaching. The volume also closes with a beautiful textual collage by Aneil Rallin asking what we might learn if we were to truly open ourselves to learning from our histories of pain and tragedy, human and otherwise. Rallin pushes the limits of normative understanding, drawing connections between whale suicides, climate violence, homophobia, and the queer teen deaths that precipitated Dan Savage's *It Gets Better* movement.

While the book does important work in both the realms of praxis and pedagogy, the joining of the two concepts could have been stronger, especially with regard to the pedagogical implications of the queer praxis chapters. Many of the most interesting chapters that emphasize queer praxis outside of the traditional classroom are unfortunately absent of explicit connections to pedagogy. While pedagogically-minded readers will have no problem discerning the implications for themselves, readers have missed the opportunity to hear exactly what connections the authors had in mind between their work and the collection's theme of pedagogy. Likewise, those writing on more traditional sites of pedagogy tended to overlook concerns of praxis not immediately apparent in the classroom. Overall, this critique is a minor one, especially when weighed against the benefit of having a variety of voices contributing thoughtfully to such large concepts as queer pedagogy and praxis.

Identifying the intended audience for this particular book is challenging. On the one hand, queer is an expansive category not dependent on identity (in their chapter, McBeth and Pauliny "flirt with the idea that all students in the first-year class are Queer" (60)). Likewise, pedagogy has its role not just in classrooms but in nearly every facet of our lives, and the same can certainly be said of activist praxis. Many of the authors in this book acknowledge these larger audiences; no one who has read Freire or hooks would be lost in this book. On the other hand, there is something quite powerful about understanding a text as written by queer educators for queer educators to educate in ways that align with the political nature of their queerness. Perhaps I will leave it at this: the audience for this book is anyone who would benefit from unlearning the indoctrination of homophobic, transmisogynist systems and who would like strategies for keeping these thought patterns out of their own teaching/mentoring/activism.

 [Bio](#)

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Nick Marsellas is a graduate student and teaching fellow at the University of Pittsburgh. His work interrogates ethical dilemmas and opportunities that arise from teaching queer topics in the undergraduate writing classroom.

More broadly, his work examines the effects of white-nationalist mobilization and transphobia on university classrooms and policies.



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